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ABSTRACT

In an instructional experiment in poetry in a college English literature course, chronology of publication and labels of authorship were ignored in the study of Wordsworth and Coleridge's "Lyrical Ballads." In the original plan for the "Lyrical Ballads," Coleridge was to supply poems treating supernatural elements as real, while Wordsworth was to give ordinary subjects the "charm of novelty" so as to invest them with supernatural feeling. In the instructional experiment, complementary poems were studied together, stripped of textbook apparatus, editorial explication, authors' biographies, and background events. A benefit of the approach was the students' realization that great poetry has been produced by writers working to submerge their own distinct identities to achieve an "associate labor." (DF)

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Teaching without "Authorship Meum and Tuum"

> They did not think of authorship meum and tuum then. Few persons are now competent to take an account of that partnership. Indeed who wants to strike any balance?
>
> --Henry Nelson Coleridge, in a letter to Alexander Dyce, 6 February 1836.[1]

I come fresh and enthusiastic from a successful experiment in suspending for a few class periods in a row the inevitable distractions of such matters as textbook divisions, authorship and author's personalities, and the publication dates of poetry, in a consideration of some of the 1798 Lyrical Ballads of Wordsworth and Coleridge. It is an approach I am eager to recommend and to try again, but already I am delighted at the ways I have been able to see students get within their grasp all at once some of the most important ideas and poems of the Romantic Age, a sense of the partnership which produced the Lyrical Ballads, comments on that volume and their intentions by the poets themselves in later years in their letters and notes and in Biographia Literaria and the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, and some specific knowledge

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of the poetic and personal relationships of Coleridge and Wordsworth both in 1798 and afterward.

Near the end of The Prelude, Wordsworth reminds Coleridge of the work of composition of the Lyrical Ballads in words that many readers find somewhat perplexing:

> Thou in bewitching words, with happy heart,
> Didst chaunt the vision of that Ancient Man,
> The bright-eyed Mariner, and rueful woes
> Didst utter of the Lady Christabel;
> And I, associate with such labour, steeped
> In soft forgetfulness the livelong hours,
> Murmuring of him who, joyous hap, was found,
> After the perils of his moonlight ride,
> Near the loud waterfall; or her who sate
> In misery near the miserable Thorn. (14.398-407)

More than one student has wondered in my presence how Wordsworth could mention in the same breath "The Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel," two of the best poems in our language, and his own seemingly (though perhaps intentionally) unmarvelous productions, "The Thorn" and "The Idiot Boy." What can the poet of The Prelude hope for his readers to gain when he compels us to consider these four poems together?

A useful answer, as my students and I have found during this experiment, lies in the original plan for the Lyrical Ballads, even though that plan was "properly speaking . . . never fulfilled,"[2] the plan summarized by Coleridge in Chapter 14 of Biographia Literaria:

> The thought suggested itself . . . that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and the agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. . . . For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves.

It is this original plan, and the "associate . . . labour" of carrying it out, to which the lines from The Prelude refer. Coleridge was primarily to supply poems treating supernatural elements as if they were real. Wordsworth was to give to ordinary subjects the "charm of novelty" so as "to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural." We know, of course, that they actually achieved no such tidy division of labor, and each made suggestions for the other's poems. Furthermore, by the time Lyrical Ballads went to press, the balance of the original plan had been sacrificed to a number of additions and deletions. "Christabel," despite the fact that Wordsworth saw it as crucial to the plan of what he called the "joint labourers" (Prelude 14.443), was finally left out, either because Coleridge could not finish it or because he was too close to the poem to recognize its greatness. Besides the omission of "Christabel," but perhaps related to that omission, there were

other changes made between plan and publication. "Peter Bell" may well have been held back because Wordsworth recognized it as too pointed a "challenge to Coleridge's supernaturalism," as a recent critic suggests.[3] And "Tintern Abbey," which concluded the published volume, of course was an afterthought, never intended to fit the original plan. Even so, the original contrasting and complementary aims built into the plan remained in the minds of both Coleridge and Wordsworth, as the lines I haved cited from The Prelude suggest. And it is those aims that my students and I have found so valuable in guiding both the organization of our study and our understanding of the four poems which exemplify the aims.

Again, concerning that original plan for the Lyrical Ballads, Coleridge wrote in May of 1798 to Joseph Cottle, the intended publisher: "We deem that the volumes offered to you are to a certain degree one work, in kind tho' not in degree, as an Ode is one work--& that our different poems are as stanzas, good relatively rather than absolutely."[4] I believe that it is in the four poems mentioned together in Prelude 14 that students can gain a sense of this crucial "Ode"-like quality. I believe further that when we and our students read "The Ancient Mariner" or "Christabel" or "The Thorn" or "The Idiot Boy" as separate pieces by separate authors--and that is the way textbooks generally arrange them and the way we usually do read them--we do them a violence, as Coleridge's statement to Cottle suggests, akin to reading one stanza of a long poem out of context and neglecting the other stanzas.

The poems are companion pieces and are to be read, and studied, and taught in pairs. "The Thorn" and "The Ancient Mariner," different

though the two poems surely are, are complementary works. Not every student reading "The Thorn" in a modern anthology would know that for the poets of Lyrical Ballads the poem is about its narrator, a retired sea captain, an ancient mariner from ordinary life--a mariner selected, says a crucial introductory note not always printed with the poem in textbooks, "to exhibit some of the general laws by which superstition acts upon the mind" and essential "to give this Poem its full effect."[5] For the full effect in both these poems, in fact, we must conduct a comparison probing of the minds of both narrators, the old seaman and the ancient mariner. These minds, at once so different, are curiously similar in their evasiveness, their capacity to find the truth but their unwillingness to keep it. Coleridge's mariner hails the albatross "in God's name" (line 66) but shoots it anyway. Rather than examine the full consequences of that act, he says, "I . . . drew my eyes away" and soon "I closed my lids and kept them close" (lines 240-41; 248). And there are details of this story, he says, which "I have not to declare" (line 394). Only when he overcomes this evasiveness can the mariner begin the road back toward salvation, begin also to be able to serve others by his "strange power of speech" (line 587). The complementary sea captain of "The Thorn" displays a comparable evasiveness: "More know I not, I wish I did" (line 144), he says, when he actually knows a good deal more, even as he repeats "I cannot tell" (line 214), and again "I cannot tell" (line 243)--so that even though the old sailor knows at least part of what he refuses to tell ("All and each agree" on some of the most important facts which he claims not to know--line 207) his listener is left

apparently bewildered by his tale, neither a sadder nor a wiser man. In the context of the Lyrical Ballads Ode, then, a context intended by both poets, "The Thorn" and "The Ancient Mariner" become sensitive psychological probings of evasion and repression, with a contrast between the saving power of facing up responsibly to hard truth in one poem and the failure to do so in the other.

Similarly, my students and I have found that "Christabel," which we have restored to its intended place in the Lyrical Ballads Ode, and "The Idiot Boy" were planned by their authors, among other things, of course, as complementary approaches to a single theme, and that theme, closely related to the "Thorn" and "Mariner" stanzas of the Ode, a most attractive one to two such theoretical, experimental poets as Coleridge and Wordsworth were in 1798: the theme of language, the word, and how one's use and misuse of words may at once both reveal and hide thoughts, clarify or distort, so that we often learn as much about a speaker's mind from what is not said as from what is, or from what appears mistakenly said as from what appears correctly stated--what Freud calls paraphasia.[6] Here again the poets, according to the plan, are tracing one of the primary laws of human nature. "There may exist for every one," says Freud, "a limit beyond which his psyche fails in the attempt to cope with the demands which the excitation in question makes upon him."[7] For Betty Foy in "The Idiot Boy" it is the infantile mentality of her lost son that provokes the anxiety which results in her own infantile behavior and paraphasia, but for all of us there may be similar limits past which our minds and our language

cannot securely go. For the once seemingly well-adjusted Christabel and her father the crisis presented by Geraldine seems beyond coping. In "Christabel," in the form we have the poem, the failure of the word is permanent; both father and daughter are totally vanquished by Geraldine's utterance-dominating spell. By contrast, it is a cure for essentially the same "sad distemper" (line 247) that "The Idiot Boy" depicts. When Betty Foy forsakes suicide and self-pity, when her meditations on nature lead her to the waterfall, and when she recovers from the "drunken pleasure" (line 380) of finding Johnny, Betty's power of language returns fully and clearly, with, in fact, a clarity that throws into strong relief Johnny's confusing of cock and owl and of sun and moon, with which the poem ends--and with which, by the poet's account,[8] it began. The two poems, with their opposite endings, show the complementary relationship originally planned for the Lyrical Ballads, with "Christabel" in a sense presenting the problem and "The Idiot Boy" offering the solution.

My students and I in our recent experiment of ignoring for the moment chronology of publication and labels of authorship have found these four poems, products of the "associate . . . labour" of "that summer," to work very well indeed as the stanzas of what was planned as a Lyrical Ballads Ode, as Coleridge described it--closely related, complementary, mutually enlightening.

Equally enlightening for students to whom team-teaching and similar "innovations" are familiar notions is the realization that great poetry can be--has been--produced in tandem by writers

unconcerned by tidy textbook arrangements and divisions, "joint labourers" working, in fact, to submerge their own distinct identities in order to achieve a genuine "associate . . . labour." One of my students, Mark Taylor, expressed what appeared to be the feelings of the whole group when he wrote at the end of the semester, "I have never experienced poetry, except in a chronological way, poet by poet. . . . For once, I saw the unity in poetry."

What he really saw, I hope and believe, is both unity and diversity, a beginning glimpse, at least, of that "perception of similitude in dissimilitude" for which Wordsworth, toward the end of the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, makes such very large claims. The accuracy with which we achieve this perception, claims the poet, feeds our minds, directs our passions, develops our taste and our moral feelings. Such are the fruits to be harvested from the study of poetry. But the experiment I have described tells me more surely than I have known before that our students must, at least eventually, really study poetry--poetry stripped of textbook apparatus, of editorial explication, of authors' biographies, of background events --poetry without "authorship meum and tuum."

Notes

[1]Cited in William Knight, ed., Prose Works of William Wordsworth (London, 1896), I, xiii.

[2]"Never fulfilled," at least partly because Wordsworth's contributions came to outnumber those of Coleridge by almost five to one. See Mary Jacobus, Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads" (1798) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 5.

[3]Jacobus, p. 262.

[4]Earl Leslie Griggs, ed., Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), I, 412. STC's emphasis.

[5]The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), II, 512-13.

[6]On Aphasia: A Critical Study, trans. E. Stengel (New York: International Universities Press, 1954), p. 13.

[7]The Problem of Anxiety, trans. Henry Alden Bunker (New York: Norton, 1936), p. 91.

[8]Johnny's words in the last stanza were "the foundation of the whole," Wordsworth told Isabella Fenwick.